

# The AUCTION BLOCK

A NOVEL OF NEW YORK LIFE

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## SYNOPSIS.

Peter Knight, defeated for political office in his town, decides to venture New York in order that the family fortune might benefit by the expected rise of his charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei, Knight, now stage beauty with Bergman's Revue, for a special article. Her coin-hunting mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but Sloan, the press agent, later adds his information. Lorelei attends Millionaire Hammon's gorgeous entertainment. She meets Merkle, a wealthy dyspeptic. Bob Wharton comes uninvited.

Adoree Demorest is a queer woman. Nobody really knows anything about her life. She is advertised as vicious merely because such advertisement attracts attention to her and money to the theater owner. Her place in this story makes the story much better than it would be otherwise. Pay heed to Adoree's doings.

## CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"Why don't you ask Miss Demorest? She came with you."

Wharton sighed hopelessly. "Something queer about that Jane. D'you know what made us late? She went to mass on the way down."

"Mass? At what hour?"

"It was a special midnight service conducted for actors. I sat in the taxi and waited. It did me a lot of good."

Some time later Merkle returned to find Bob still animatedly talking; catching Lorelei's eye, she signified a desire to speak with her, but she found it difficult to escape from the intoxicated young man at her side. At last, however, she succeeded, and joined her supper companion at the farther edge of the fountain, where the dressless couple still poured water from the cornucopias.

Merkle was watching his friend's son with a frown.

"You have just left the personification of everything I detest," he volunteered. "You heard what his father said about raising him—how he taught Bob to drink when he drank and follow in his footsteps. But that isn't what I want to say to you. Help me feed these foolish goldfish while I talk."

"Do you think anybody would understand if they overheard you? I fancied you and I were the only sober ones left."

"Some of the girls are all right," Merkle eyed his companion closely. "Don't you drink?"

"I have nothing but my looks. Wouldn't I be a fool to sacrifice them?"

"You seem to be sensible, Miss Knight. Something tells me you're very much the right sort. I know you're trying to get ahead, and—I can help you if you'll help me. I need an agent, and I'll pay a good price to the right person."

"How mysterious?"

"I'll be plain. That affair yonder"—he nodded toward Jarvis Hammon and Lillas Lynn—"strikes you as a well, as a flirtation. It is something very different, for he's in earnest. He thinks he is injuring no one but himself with this business, and he is willing to pay the price; but the fact is he is putting other people in peril—me among the rest. Nobody outside of a man's family has the right to question his private life so long as it is private in its consequences. But when his secret conduct affects his business affairs, when



"Why Don't You Ask Miss Demorest?"

It endangers vast interests in which others are concerned, then his associates are entitled to take a hand. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly. But you don't want me; you want a detective."

"My dear child, we have them by the score. We hire them by the year, and they have told us all they can. We need inside information."

The girl's answer was made with her habitual self-possession.

"I've heard about such things. I've heard about men prying into each other's private affairs, pretending to be friends when they were enemies, and using scandal for business ends. Lillas Lynn is my friend—at least in a way—and Mr. Hammon is my host, just as he is yours. Oh, I know; this isn't a conventional party, and I'm not here as a conventional guest—inside the little coin purse he gave me is a hundred-dollar bill—but, just the same, I don't care to act as your spy."

Merkle's grave attention arrested Lorelei's burst of indignation.

"Will you believe me," he asked, "when I tell you that Jarvis Hammon and Hannibal Wharton are the two best friends I have in the world? This is more than a business matter, Miss Knight."

"I can hardly believe that."

"It's true, however; I mean to serve Hammon. At the same time I must serve myself and those who trust me. I fear—in fact, I'm sure—that he is being used. I've learned things about Miss Lynn that you may not know. What you have told me tonight adds to my anxiety, and I must know more."

"What, for instance?"

"Her real feeling for him—her intentions—her relations with a man named Melcher."

"Maxey Melcher?"

"The same. Do you know his business?"

"No."

"He is a gambler, a political power; a crafty, unscrupulous fellow who represents—big people. By helping me you can serve many innocent persons, and, most of all, perhaps, Hammon himself."

Lorelei was silent for a moment. "This is very unusual," she said at length. "I don't know whether to believe you or not."

"Suppose, then, you let the matter rest and keep your eyes open. When you convince yourself who means best to Jarvis—Miss Lynn and Melcher and their crowd, or I and mine—make your decision. You may name your own price."

"There wouldn't be any price," she told him, impatiently. "I'll wait."

Merkle bowed. "I can trust your discretion. Thank you for listening to me, and thank you for being agreeable to an irascible old dyspeptic. Will you permit me to drive you home when you're ready?"

"I'm ready now."

But as Lorelei made her way unobtrusively toward the cloakroom she encountered Robert Wharton, who barred her path.

"Fairy Princess, you ran away," he declared, accusingly.

"I'm leaving." She saw that his intoxication had reached a more advanced stage. His cheeks were flushed; his eyes were wild and unsteady.

"Good news! The night is young; we'll watch it grow up."

"Thank you, no. I'm going home."

"A common mistake. Others have tried and failed." With extreme gravity he focused his gaze upon her, saying, "Home is the one place that our mayor can't close."

She extended her hand. "Good night."

"I don't understand. Speak English."

"Good night."

Wharton's countenance darkened unpleasantly, and his voice was rough.

"Where'd you learn that line? It's country stuff. We'll leave when I'm ready. Now we'll have a trot."

The music was playing; other couples were dancing, and he seized her in his arms, whirling her away. In and out among the chairs he piloted a dizzy course, while she yielded reluctantly, conscious, meanwhile, that Adoree Demorest was watching them with interest.

For an interval Wharton said nothing; then, with a change of tone, he murmured in her ear: "D'you think I'd let you spoil the whole night? Can't you see I'm crazy about you?"

Lorelei endeavored to free herself from his embrace, but he clutched her the tighter and laughed insolently.

"Nothing like a good 'turkey' to get acquainted, is there? We're going to dance till we're old folks."

She continued to struggle; they were out of step and out of time, but he held her away from himself easily, bending a hot glance upon her upturned face. She saw that he was panting and doubly drunk with her nearness. "Don't fight. I've got you."

She was smiling faintly, out of habit, but mistaking her expression, he drew her close once more, then buried his face in her neck and kissed her just at the turn of her bare shoulder.

Then she tore herself away, and his triumphant laugh was cut short as she slapped him resoundingly, her stinging fingers leaving their imprint on his cheek.

Her eyes were flaming and her lips were white with fury, though she continued to smile.

"Here! What d'you mean by that?" he cried.

She silenced him sharply. "Hush! Remember you broke in here. I'd like to see you in that fountain."

There was a swish of garments, a musical laugh, and Adoree Demorest was between them.

"I'm madly jealous, Señor Roberto," she exclaimed. "Come, you must dance once more with me. We'll finish this. What?" She swayed toward him in sympathy with the music, snapping her fingers and humming the words of the song.

"She—walloped me—like a sailor," the young man stammered, incoherently. "She—wants to see me in the fountain."

"Then jump in like a gentleman," laughed the danseuse. "But dance with me first." She entwined her arms about him and forced him into motion. As she danced away she signaled over her shoulder to Lorelei, who made haste to seek the cloakroom.

When she emerged John Merkle was waiting in the hall. A shout of laughter echoed from the banquet hall, and she started.

"That's nothing," Merkle told her. "Bob Wharton is in the fountain. He says he's a goldfish."

## CHAPTER V.

No matter how chaotic the general household schedule, Lorelei was always assured of ten hours' sleep, a dainty breakfast upon rising, and a substantial meal before theater time. Her mother saw to it that this program was



"What D'you Mean by That?" He Cried.

religiously adhered to. Irrespective, also, of her careless disregard of social appointments, she was never permitted to miss one with the hairdresser, the manicure, the masseuse, or the dozen and one other beauty specialists who form as important an adjunct to the stage woman's career as to that of the woman of fashion. All this was a vital part of that plan to which the mother had devoted herself. No racehorse on the eve of a Derby was groomed more carefully than this budding woman. In preparing her for masculine conquest the entire family took a hand. Her prospects, her actions, her triumphs, were the main topic of conversation; all other interests were subordinated to the matrimonial quest upon which she had embarked, and the three conspirators lived in a constant state of eager expectation over Lorelei's fortunes.

Mother and daughter were loitering over a midday breakfast, and Lorelei, according to custom, was recounting the incidents of the previous evening.

"It's too bad you quarreled with Mr. Wharton," Mrs. Knight commented, when she heard the full story of Hammon's party. "He'll dislike you now."

The girl shrugged faintly. "He was drunk and fresh. I can't bear a man in such a condition."

"You shouldn't antagonize a man like him, my dear. He's single, at least; and naturally he's impulsive, like all those young millionaires."

"Bob is an alcoholic. He's no good, so Mr. Merkle said."

Jim, who was immersed in the morning paper, spoke from his chair near the window.

"Why don't you go after Merkle himself, sis? Easy picking, these bankers."

Jim also had come home in the still hours of the night before and was now resting preparatory to his daily battle with the world. Just how the struggle went or where it was waged the others knew not at all.

His mother shook her head. "Those old men are all alike. Mr. Hammon will never marry Lillas."

"Is that so?" James abandoned his reading. "The older they are, the softer they get. Take it from me, on the word of a volunteer fireman, Lillas will cash in on him quicker than you think. I know."

"How do you know?" inquired his sister.

"Maybe I got the dogeared dope," mocked the brother. "Maybe Max Melcher told me. Anyhow, you could land Merkle just as easy if you'd declare Max in."

"Now, Jim," protested Mrs. Knight, "I won't let you put such ideas into her head. You and—that gang of yours—are full of tricks, but Lorelei's decent, and she's going to stay decent. You'd get everybody in jail or in the newspapers."

"Has Maxey ever been in jail? Has Tony the Barber? No, you bet they haven't, and they never will be. This fall talk is funny. Just wait and see how easy Lillas gets hers. Of course,

"What Are You Two Planning?" Inquired Lorelei.

If Lorelei could marry Wharton, that would be different, but he's no sucker."

"How is Lillas going to get hers?" insisted Lorelei.

"Wait and see." James returned to his paper.

"She'll never marry him. She hates him."

Jim laughed, and his sister broke out irritably:

"Why be so mysterious? Anybody would think you'd robbed a bank."

Jim looked up again, and this time with a scowl. "Well, every time I come through with a suggestion ma crabs it. What's the use of talking to a pair of haymakers like you, anyhow? I could grab a lot of coin for us if you'd let me. Why, Maxey has been after me a dozen times about you, but I knew you wouldn't stand for it."

"Blackmail, eh?"

Jim was highly disgusted. "What's the difference how you pronounce it? It spells k-a-t-e, and it takes a good-looking girl to pull off a deal in this town. All right—play for Bob Wharton. I'd like to meet him, though; he can do me a lot of good."

"How?"

"Well, he dropped eight-four hundred in Hebling's Sixth avenue joint the other night. Maxey owns a place on Forty-sixth street where the sky is the limit."

His sister was staring at him curiously. She had voiced misgivings concerning his activities of late, but Jim had never satisfied her inquiries. Now she asked, "What is your share?"

The young man laughed a little uncomfortably. "Forty per cent. That's usual. If he's going to gamble some, where I might as well be in on it."

The girl's next words, however, left no doubt as to her feelings.

"You're a fine specimen, aren't you?" Her lip curled; mother and son started at the bitterness of the tone. "Ugh! What a mess you've made of things. Two years ago we were decent, and now—"

Lorelei's voice broke; her eyes flamed over with tears. "I'd give anything in the world if we were all back in Vale. It took only two years of the city to spoil us."

"Ha! Better try Vale again. You'd end in a straightjacket if you did. You think you could go back, but you couldn't—nobody can after they've had a taste of the city."

"It's all wrong. The whole thing is—rotten. Sometimes I hate myself," Lorelei choked.

Mrs. Knight spoke reprovingly. "Don't be silly, dear. You know we did it all for you. But we're not complaining." Mrs. Knight put added feeling into her words. "We don't want you to live the way we've had to live; we want you to be rich and to have things. After all we've done; after all poor Peter has suffered—"

"Don't!" cried the girl, falteringly. "I think of him every hour."

"He isn't the sort that complains. I consider it very thoughtless of you to behave as you do and make it harder for us." Mrs. Knight sniffed and wiped her eyes, whereupon Lorelei

went to her and hid her face upon her mother's shoulder.

"I don't want to be unkind," she murmured, "but sometimes I'm sick with disgust, and then again I'm frightened. All the men I meet are beasts. That whole party was sordid and mean—old men drinking with girls and pawing them over. Mr. Merkle was the only nice one there." The mother was dismayed to feel her daughter shiver.

"Good Lord! You people make me sick," cried Jim, rising and making for his room. "Anybody'd think you'd been insulted."

When he had gone Mrs. Knight asked, accusingly:

"Lorelei, are you in love?"

"No, why?"

"You've said some queer things lately. You've worried me. I hope you'll never be tempted to do anything so—to be foolish. I don't intend to let you make a mess of things by marrying some chorus man. When the right person comes along you'll accept him, then you'll never have to worry again. But you must be careful."

"Do you think I'd be happy with a man like Mr. Wharton?"

"Why not? You'd at least be rich, and if rich people can't be happy, who can? If you accepted some poor boy he'd probably turn out to be a drunkard and a loafer, just like Wharton is now." She sighed. "I'd like to see you settled; we could take Peter to a specialist, and maybe he could be cured. We could go abroad and get the help of those German surgeons. I've always wanted to travel."

When Lorelei reached the theater that evening she found Lillas Lynn entertaining a caller who had been more than once in her thoughts during the day. Miss Lynn's visitor was a well-tailored man who gave a first impression of extreme physical neatness. He was immaculate in attire, his skin was fine, his color fresh; a pair of small, imperturbable eyes were set in a smiling face beneath a prematurely gray head. Max Melcher was a figure on Broadway; he had the entree to all the stage doors; he frequented the popular cafes, where he surrounded himself with men. Always affable, usually at leisure, invariably obliging, he had many friends.

At Lorelei's entrance he smiled and nodded without rising, then continued his earnest conversation with Miss Lynn. None of their words were audible to the last comer until Melcher rose to leave; then Lillas halted him with a nervous laugh, saying:

"Remember, if it doesn't go, it's a joke, and I run to cover."

"It will go," he told her, quietly, as he stroled out.

"What are you two planning?" inquired Lorelei.

"Nothing. Max drops in regularly; he used to be sweet on me." Lillas completed her make-up, then fledged nervously. "Gee!" she presently exclaimed. "I'm tired of this business. We're fools to stay in it. Think of Atlantic City on a night like this, or the mountains. This heat has completely unstrung me." She rummaged through the confusion on her table, then inquired of the dresser, "Croft, where are my white gloves?"

"They haven't come back from the cleaner's," Mrs. Croft answered.

"Not back? Then you didn't send them when I told you. You're getting altogether shiftless, Croft. When I tell you to do a thing I want it done."

"I hope I drop dead if—"

"I hope you do," snapped the indignant girl. "I told you to attend to them; now I've nothing but soiled ones."

The dresser began to weep silently. She was a small, timid old woman, upon whose manifest need of employment Lorelei had taken pity some time before. Her forgetfulness had long been a trial to both her employers.

"That's right; turn on the flood-gates," mocked Lillas. "You stop that sniveling or I'll give you something to cry for. I'm nervous enough tonight without having you in hysterics. Remember, if it ever happens again you'll go—and you'll take something with you to think about." Seizing the cleanest pair of gloves at hand, she flung out of the room in a fine fury.

"You won't let her—fire me? I need work, I do," quavered Mrs. Croft.

"Now, now. Don't mind her temper. You know Lillas is excitable."

"Excitable?" Croft wiped red eyes with a corner of her apron. "Is that what you call it? I'll be glad if her millionaire takes her out of the business, like she thinks he will. Poor man! He's laying up trouble for himself, that he is. She'll land him in the divorce court—with her flash-light photographs."

Lorelei swung around from her mirror. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I heard her and that Jew—that Maxey Melcher. They've got a photographer and witnesses. Your brother is one of 'em."

"Jim? What?"

"It's true. It's a bad crowd Mister Jim's in with. And there's something big in the air. Miffed it is. And her saying she'll box my ears. The hussy! I've heard 'em talking before tonight!"

"Tell me everything, Croft—quickly."

"I have. Only you better warn your brother—"

The assistant stage manager thrust his head through the curtains, shouting: "Your cue, Miss Knight. What the devil—"

With a gasp, Lorelei leaped to her feet and fled from the room.

## CHAPTER VI.

Lorelei did not secure another word alone with the dresser until the middle of the second act, by which time Mrs. Croft was her own colorless, work-worn self once more.

"I don't know so more than I told

you," she informed Lorelei. "Mr. Melcher has been coming here for a long time, and he always talks about Mr. Hammon. I've heard enough to know that him and her is after his money—millions of it. Mister Jim can tell you everything—" Mrs. Croft broke off her narrative suddenly, and Miss Lynn herself burst into the room, panting from a swift run up the stairs.

"Quick, Croft! Don't be all thumbs now." She tossed a sealed letter upon her table, rapidly unhooked her dress, stepped out of it, and then seated herself, extending her feet for a change of slippers. She took the moment to open and read her note.

Lorelei looked up from her sewing at a little cry of rage from Lillas. Miss Lynn had torn the message into bits and flung it from her; her eyes were blazing.

"The idiot!" she cried, furiously, rising so abruptly as almost to upset Mrs. Croft.

"What is it?"

"I—must telephone—quick! I must; or—Lorelei, dear, will you do me a favor? Run down to the door and telephone for me? I won't be off again till the curtain, and that will be too late." Lorelei rose obediently. "That's a dear. Call Tony the Barber's place—I—I've forgotten the number—anyhow, you can find it, and ask for Max. Tell him it's off; he can't come."

"Who can't come? Max?"

"No. Just say, 'Lillas sends word that it's off; he can't come.' He'll understand. There's my cue now. I'll do as much for you." Lillas was off with a rush, and Lorelei hastened after her, speculating vaguely as to the cause of all this anxiety. As Lorelei hurried down the passageway a man in evening dress turned, and she recognized Robert Wharton.

"You are sent from heaven!" he cried, at sight of her. "I enter out of the night and unburden my heart to this argus-eyed watchman, and, lo! you come flying in answer to my wish. Quick service, Judge. In appreciation of your telepathy I present you with some lumbago cure." He tossed a bank note to Regan, who snatched it eagerly on the fly.

Lorelei forestalled further words. "Please—I must telephone. I go on in a minute."

"Fairy Princess, last night I was a goldfish; tonight I am an enchanted lover—"

"Wait! I'm in a hurry." She thumbed the telephone book swiftly in search of her number, but young Wharton was not to be silenced.

"Tell him it's all off," he commanded. "You can't go; I won't let you. Promise." He laid a hand upon the telephone and eyed her gravely.

"Don't be silly. I'm telephoning for someone else."

"That's exactly what we can't permit. The 'someone else' is here—I'm it."

"I slapped you last night; I promise to do it again," Lorelei told him, sharply.

"Something whispered that you did, and all day long I have been angry; but tonight I come with another purpose. Outside is a chariot with ninety horses—French rating—champing at the throttle. We are going away from here."

"You're drunk again, Mr. Wharton?"

He glanced at the clock over Regan's head and shook his head in negation. "It's only ten-twenty. In two hours from now—"

"Give me that 'phone."

"Promise to tell him it's all off."

She smiled. "All right. I'll use those very words."

Wharton hesitated. "I trust you."

"I'm going to tell him he can't



"Tonight I am an Enchanted Lover—"

come," she said, holding out her hand. Once the instrument was hers she oscillated the hook with nervous finger, staring doubtfully at the cause of her delay. Wharton, as on the evening before, carried his intoxication with an air. He was steady on his feet, immaculate in dress, punctilious in demeanor; only his roving, reckless eye betrayed his unnatural exhilaration.

Young Wharton may be a drunkard—nay, he is a drunkard—but he has also a keen sense of humor and unquenchable optimism. Don't you like him in spite of his low habits?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)